The Caste System in Brief:

The origins of the caste system in India and Nepal are shrouded, but it seems to have originated more than two thousand years ago. Under this system, which is associated with Hinduism, people were categorized by their occupations.

Although originally caste depended upon a person's work, it soon became hereditary. Each person was born into a unalterable social status.

The four primary castes are: Brahmin, the priests; Kshatriya, warriors and nobility; Vaisya, farmers, traders and artisans; and Shudra, tenant farmers and servants. Some people were born outside of (and below) the caste system. They were called "untouchables."

Theology behind the Castes:

Reincarnation is one of the basic beliefs in Hinduism; after each life, a soul is reborn into a new material form. A particular soul's new form depends upon the virtuousness of its previous behavior. Thus, a truly virtuous person from the Shudra caste could be rewarded with rebirth as a Brahmin in his or her next life.

Souls can move not only among different levels of human society, but also into other animals - hence the vegetarianism of many Hindus. Within a life cycle, people had little social mobility. They had to strive for virtue during their present lives in order to attain a higher station the next time around.

Daily Significance of Caste:

Practices associated with caste varied through time and across India, but they had some common features.

The three key areas of life dominated by caste were marriage, meals and religious worship. Marriage across caste lines was strictly forbidden; most people even married within their own sub-caste or jati.

At meal times, anyone could accept food from the hands of a Brahmin, but a Brahmin would be polluted if he or she took certain types of food from a lower caste person. At the other extreme, if an untouchable dared to draw water from a public well, he or she polluted the water and nobody else could use it.

The Kshatriya and Vaisya castes had full rights to worship, but in some places Shudras (the servant caste) were not allowed to offer sacrifices to the gods. Untouchables were barred entirely from temples, and sometimes were not even allowed to set foot on temple grounds.

If the shadow of an untouchable touched a Brahmin, he/she would be polluted, so untouchables had to lay face-down at a distance when a Brahmin passed.
Thousands of Castes:

Although the early Vedic sources name four primary castes, in fact there were thousands of castes, sub-castes and communities within Indian society. These jati were the basis of both social status and occupation.

Castes or sub-castes besides the four mentioned in the Bhagavad Gita include such groups as the Bhumihar or landowners, Kayastha or scribes, and the Rajput, who are a northern sector of the Kshatriya or warrior caste.

Some castes arose from very specific occupations, such as the Garudi - snake charmers - or the Sonjhari, who collected gold from river beds.

The Untouchables:

People who violated social norms could be punished by being made "untouchables." This was not the lowest caste - they and their descendants were completely outside of the caste system.

Untouchables were considered so impure that any contact with them by a caste member would contaminate the other person. The caste-person would have to bathe and wash his or her clothing immediately. Untouchables could not even eat in the same room as caste members.

The untouchables did work that no-one else would do, like scavenging animal carcasses, leather-work, or killing rats and other pests. They could not be cremated when they died.

Caste among Non-Hindus:

Curiously, non-Hindu populations in India sometimes organized themselves into castes as well.

After the introduction of Islam on the subcontinent, for example, Muslims were divided into classes such as the Sayed, Sheikh, Mughal, Pathan, and Qureshi. These castes are drawn from several sources - the Mughal and Pathan are ethnic groups, roughly speaking, while the Qureshi name comes from the Prophet Muhammad's clan in Mecca.

Small numbers of Indians were Christian from c. 50 CE onward, but Christianity expanded after the Portuguese arrived in the 16th century. Many Christian Indians still observed caste distinctions, however.

Origins of the Caste System:

How did this system come about?

Early written evidence about the caste system appears in the Vedas, Sanskrit-language texts from as early as 1500 BCE, which form the basis of Hindu scripture. The Rigveda, from c. 1700-1100 BCE, rarely mentions caste distinctions, and indicates that social mobility was common.
The Bhagavad Gita, however, from c. 200 BCE-200 CE, emphasizes the importance of caste. In addition, the "Laws of Manu" or Manusmriti from the same era defines the rights and duties of the four different castes or varnas.

Thus, it seems that the Hindu caste system began to solidify sometime between 1000 and 200 BCE.

The Caste System During Classical Indian History:

The caste system was not absolute during much of Indian history. For example, the renowned Gupta Dynasty, which ruled from 320 to 550 CE, were from the Vaishya caste rather than the Kshatriya. Many later rulers also were from different castes, such as the Madurai Nayaks (r. 1559-1739) who were Balijas (traders).

From the 12th century onwards, much of India was ruled by Muslims. These rulers reduced the power of the Hindu priestly caste, the Brahmins. The traditional Hindu rulers and warriors, or Kshatriyas, nearly ceased to exist in north and central India. The Vaishya and Shudra castes also virtually melded together.

Although the Muslim rulers' faith had a strong impact on the Hindu upper castes in the centers of power, anti-Muslim feeling in rural areas actually strengthened the caste system. Hindu villagers reconfirmed their identity through caste affiliation.

Nonetheless, during the six centuries of Islamic domination (c. 1150-1750), the caste system evolved considerably. For example, Brahmins began to rely on farming for their income, since the Muslim kings did not give rich gifts to Hindu temples. This practice was considered justified so long as Shudras did the actual physical labor.

The British Raj and Caste:

When the British Raj began to take power in India in 1757, they exploited the caste system as a means of social control.

The British allied themselves with the Brahmin caste, restoring some of its privileges that had been repealed by the Muslim rulers. However, many Indian customs concerning the lower castes seemed discriminatory to the British, and were outlawed.

During the 1930s and 40s, the British government made laws to protect the "Scheduled castes" - untouchables and low-caste people.

Within Indian society in the 19th and early 20th there was a move towards the abolition of untouchability, as well. In 1928, the first temple welcomed untouchables or Dalits ("the crushed ones") to worship with its upper-caste members. Mohandas Gandhi advocated emancipation for the Dalits, too, coining the term harijan or "Children of God" to describe them.

Caste Relations in Independent India:

The Republic of India became independent on August 15, 1947. India's new government instituted laws to protect the "Scheduled castes and tribes" - including both the untouchables
and groups who live traditional life-styles. These laws include quota systems to ensure access to education and to government posts.

Over the past sixty years, therefore, in some ways a person's caste has become more of a political category than a social or religious one.

Sources:


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